

AT A MEETING
of the
**COMMUNITY ORGANISATION,
LEISURE AND CULTURE SCRUTINY
AND PERFORMANCE PANEL** held at
The Council House, Walsall on
Thursday 2 February 2006 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Chairman)
Councillor Phillips (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Ault
Councillor Beeley
Councillor Beilby
Councillor Burley
Councillor Bott

Officers in Attendance

Karen Adderley
Tim Challans
Vicky Crowshaw
Paul Simpson
Pat Warner
Nikki Ehlen

APOLOGIES

Apologies for non attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor Arif and Councillor Woodruff.

SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions notified at this meeting.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whipping identified at this meeting.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 December 2005, a copy having been previously circulated to each member of the panel be approved and signed by the chair as a correct record.

NOTES AND UPDATES FROM SPECIAL MEETINGS AND WORK GROUPS

Community Association Working Group

The panel received the final review document from the working group: -

(see annexed)

Councillor Phillips presented the review document and advised the panel that a lot of very hard work had gone to preparing the document and she hoped that the panel would support the seven recommendations.

She went on to say that community associations in the Bloxwich and Blakenhall area were highlighted as being in need of further support to enable them to continue their very valuable and needed work in the community, particularly because of the escalation in the anti-social behaviour in that area.

Members welcomed the review document and Councillor Burley commented that the recommendations could be strengthened to indicate the need for community associations to have properly run management committees. This would enable the community at large to take ownership of the services being provided in their area. Further more, it should emphasise the need for adequate training to be given to those involved in the running of the community associations to encourage their participation and to ensure they are fully aware of the responsibilities involved.

Councillor Bott concurred with the comments made by Councillor Burley in that the community would be better supported if more members from that community is involved in their community associations and if there is uniformity of advice given to these associations.

Discussions ensued about the way community associations were supported and Tim Challans advised the panel that following a recent inspection of community associations, in particular the youth services, a large number of changes have been made and continue to be made. Following the re-inspection of the council by Government Office West Midlands recently, the progress made was apparent and government office has expressed satisfaction that the council is making good progress in partnership with the community associations.

Tim Challans reaffirmed this previous intention to provide members with a copy of the youth services report.

He continued that following the Adult Learning and Continuing Education inspection the results showed some areas within that service which needed to be reassessed and steps have already been taken to improve this and to implement some of the resolutions already set out in the review document.

Councillor Bott commented that things had moved on since the completion of the report and he made specific reference to the negotiations taking place at the Darlaston Community Association in respect of the posts there.

Tim Challans advised the panel that officers were working with individual community associations to discuss the changes associated with staffing matters.

Councillor Burley expressed concern that ward councillors had not been involved in these negotiations.

Members agreed that ward councillors should be involved in the overall discussions regarding the changes within community associations following the completion of the negotiations relating to individual officers.

The panel agreed that the recommendations should be strengthened as follows and

RESOLVED:

That an additional recommendation ie (no.8) be added as set out below and that the review document be submitted to cabinet for approval and action: -

- "That cabinet ensure that management committees are in place within each community association; that appropriate training and advice be given to personnel and that regular meetings of these management committees are held.

Green Spaces Working Group

The chair advised the panel that the next meeting of the Green Spaces Working Group will take place on the 2 March 2006 and members will be receiving the draft strategy. The consultant will be attending that meeting to present the strategy and answer any questions in respect of the findings.

Members were briefly advised that Local Neighbourhood Partnerships were currently organising workshops to enable councillors to submit their views on the green space strategy.

Citizens Panel – Leisure and Culture Services Survey Workshop

Councillor Towe advised members of the discussions at a special meeting of the panel held on 6 and 18 January 2006.

The notes of those meetings were submitted: -

(see annexed)

He advised the panel that both meetings were very informative and that at the meeting on 18 January 2006 members had contributed to the preparation of the questions for the survey and has requested to be kept informed of the results of the survey.

Voluntary Organisations Grant Applications

The panel was advised that a workshop will be arranged shortly to enable members to consider this issue. At that meeting it is hoped that members will be able to review the two types of application forms which are being prepared by officers and to consider the banding groups which could be applied to these applications.

Budget Information 2006/07.

The report of the Executive Director setting out the additional information requested at the last meeting was submitted: -

(see annexed)

- Green Spaces (Parks) budget;
- Library Services budget;
- Proposed Investment bids re: Community Associations;
- Proposed budget reduction re: LNP consultancy costs.

Green Spaces (Parks) Budget

Members considered the additional information submitted were advised that Green Flag status could be achieved within existing budgets, with some improvements to grounds maintenance. The information produced set out the details of the budget allocated for each park within the LNP areas.

Councillor Burley asked for clarification of the information relating to employee costs, in particular an indication of the total number of employees within the grounds maintenance service.

Some clarification was also requested about grounds maintenance costs and the “other the running costs” referred to in the document. Members felt that the information should specify what the running costs relate to, and should identify the specific services provided by grounds maintenance budget.

Councillor Phillips said she was unsure whether the method of provision of funds for grounds maintenance was a fair one because of the differences in size of the Local Neighbourhood Partnership areas and the number of parks and green spaces within these areas.

Councillor Bott expressed concern about the value for money the grounds maintenance service was providing within the parks and that some action needed to be taken to ensure that adequate services were being provided.

Tim Challans advised that work was being undertaken with Street Pride to produce a management plan for each park to address the issues of concern.

Councillor Phillips requested that the chairs' of the Friends of Parks Groups be provided with a copy of the plans to enable them to assist with better monitor of the services being provided within the parks.

Councillor Towe thanked officers for the information provided and requested that additional information be prepared for a meeting in the new municipal year. The additional information should also cover: -

1. Employee costs, including the number of hours spent at each location.
2. Running costs for each park.
3. The associate costs for each LNP area.

Library Services Budget

Members considered the information in detail and were of the view that although the information presented was very helpful, further investigation would need to be undertaken to clarify a number of outstanding issues including the allocation of the library budget for each LNP area particularly since they did not appear to equate fairly with the population.

Councillor Towe said that this was an area which could be looked at in more detail in the next municipal year.

LNP consultancy costs

The panel noted the additional information supplied in respect of the consultancy costs.

Panel's Budget Report to Cabinet 18 January 2006

The report prepared by the Executive Director setting out this panel's resolution to cabinet following its meeting in November was submitted: -

(see annexed)

Also submitted at this meeting were additional financial information in respect of the efficiency and investment bid changes following cabinet's meeting on 18 January 2006: -

(see annexed)

The panel noted the report to cabinet and considered cabinet's decision in respect of the investment bids proposed by this panel and the changes made by cabinet to the proposed budget efficiency schemes.

Members expressed great concern that only one of the investment bids proposed to cabinet had been approved.

The panel were advised that although no monies had been approved for community associations, £100 thousand had been allocated to Local Neighbourhood Partnerships.

Members also expressed concern that £50 thousand had been allocated within the budget for the "Ready, Steady, Summer" scheme even though some community associations were having to provide that service from within their own budgets.

Paul Simpson advised the panel that through the LAA a commission had been set up to consider targeting funds for services such as "Ready, Steady, Summer" schemes to ensure that these service can be continued on a long-term basis.

The panel also expressed concern about the increase in the efficiency savings despite the panel having already submitted their recommendation at the last meeting to cabinet.

Councillor Towe said his understanding was that a reduction in the investment bids would equate to a reduction in efficiency savings targeted at this service area.

Vicky Crowshaw advised the panel that although such guidance had been given to scrutiny panels, they had also been advised that the final decision in respect of the efficiency savings and the investment schemes would be for cabinet to make.

Councillor Bott expressed his concern that the increase in efficiency savings and the reduction in investment in the green spaces and parks schemes had resulted in the initiative being lost to improve the situation, particularly where the anti-social behaviour in parks is increasing.

Further discussions ensued and the panel

RESOLVED to cabinet that: -

1. This panel is disappointed that no finance has been allocated to the Olympic Scholarship bid and request that consideration is given to utilising the remaining uncommitted balance on the earmarked reserve, if any, not used by community associations as a starting point for the scholarship.

2. This panel is also disappointed that the money requested for Community Associations to support young people and older people have not been allocated. Further, the panel registers its disappointment that the park force initiative is also not funded.

Draft Capital Programme 2006/07 – 2010/11 and Draft Corporate Revenue Budget 2006/7 – 2010/11

The reports of the Executive Director were submitted: -

(see annexed)

Paul Simpson presented the corporate position following the receipt of the draft revenue settlement and the reasons behind the changes to the budget proposals.

In noting the changes presented to members a number of questions were raised and concerns expressed. The panel was advised that up to £750 thousand of the £2million efficiency savings had been taken form within the Community Organisation, Leisure and Culture Services budget.

Of the questions raised some related to the specific posts being proposed for possible deletion.

The panel were advised that alternative external funding was being sought and was likely to be found to protect some of the posts being earmarked for deletion.

In respect of the posts within Equality Services, the panel was advised that adequate investment had been allocated over the last two years and this would meet all the requirements within that service area.

Councillor Ault queried the green spaces budget and whether any costing had been undertaken in relation to the provision of park keepers against the costs of repairing the damage within the parks resulting from vandalism whilst not having the protection of someone guarding the park.

Tim Challans said this was a costing which had never been undertaken and undertook to provide a information about the costs of vandalism for consideration at the next meeting of the panel.

The chairman thanked officers for all the work they had undertaken in preparing the various bits of information presented to the meeting. Having considered the matter fully the panel

RESOLVED to cabinet: -

- That whilst this panel understands the loss of revenue grant as a result of the settlement it is disappointed that Community Organisation, Leisure and Culture Services has been a major recipient of the budget reductions

without this panel being given the opportunity to look as possible savings within other services.

- That the information set out in the Draft Capital Programme be received and noted.

BV12 – Sickness Absences

The chairman advised the panel that the additional information requested of the last meeting relating to sickness absences within each directorate would be submitted to the next meeting of this panel.

Walsall Illuminations

The chairman confirmed that a special meeting of the panel is being arranged to look at the Walsall Illuminations, in particular, the revenue figures and the running costs involved. He said that as soon as a convenient date has been arranged, members would be advised.

Schools Disability Access Strategy

The report prepared by the Managing Director of Education Walsall was submitted: -

(see annexed)

Members welcomed the report as an improvement to services within schools.

In answer to concerns expressed in respect of access to the Town Hall, members were advised that a programme of works had already been drawn up to look at improving access.

Forward Plan of Key Decisions

Members noted the items relating to this scrutiny panel which will be considered by cabinet at various meetings throughout the year.

Training Opportunities

Members received and noted the information relating to the Local Government - Overview and Scrutiny explained course which will take place on the 28 February 2006 in London.

Date of Next Meeting

The panel agreed that the next meeting of the panel will be held on 5 April 2006.

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 8.15 p.m.

Chairman:

Date: